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ABSTRACT

In this paper, patterns of change in the general modes of interpersonal communication in a high-information society are explored in the light of the diffusion of communications technology. Communications technology is defined as the sum total of mechanical systems that transmit, receive, and store information, while interpersonal communication is referred to as the process of symbolic interaction between people with or without technological mediation. The paper states that based on observed experiences in the high-information society, potential consequences of introducing communications technology in traditional or developing societies are disharmonious impact on existing social structure, values, and interpersonal relationships; instability in the way life-activities, beliefs, and attitudes are organized; and increased cognitive flexibility of individuals for dealing with changes on the personal level. (Author/TJ)

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DYNAMICS OF COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION: A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

In this paper, patterns of change in the general modes of interpersonal communication in a "high-information" society are explored in the light of diffusion of communications technology. Communications technology is defined as the sum total of mechanical systems that transmit, receive, and store information. Interpersonal communication refers to the process of symbolic interaction between people with or without technological mediation. Based on observed experiences in the "high-information" society, potential consequences of introducing communications technology in traditional or developing societies are discussed.

A "communication revolution" has struck many portions of the world. Modern man lives in a "high-information" society or "techno-culture." Rather than information starvation, his key problem seems to be how to organize, process, and control the surfeit of messages surrounding him. Yet, in some countries, man still lives in a technology-free environment in which most of the communication messages are transmitted through face-to-face interactions. Between the two extremes live most of the world's inhabitants.

Communications technology is not just another form of many technological innovations; changes in communication processes permeate the whole society. It is in and through communication that our very humanity exists and social systems are maintained. The use of various communication machineries directly and indirectly affect the patterns of symbolic interaction among individuals and groups. Together with the more familiar media such as the telephone, radio and television, computers, satellites, video-cassette recorders and "picture phones" have begun to alter the scope and nature of human communication

experiences.

The technological advancement in communications portends enormous advances in information processing and distribution by making information accessible in kinds and quantities not dreamed of heretofore. By transmitting the information necessary for improved selection from alternative courses of action, expanded communications and additional information can enable the alternative performance of particular activities at reduced social costs. Furthermore, they can enhance the awareness of decision makers to alternatives that would not have been considered.

The positive effects of communications technology, especially mass media, have been theorized by scholars as promoting the economic and political development processes of traditional societies. Daniel Lerner (1958, 1969, 1973), for example, views mass media as enhancing the "psychic mobility" or "empathy" of individuals in traditional societies, which in turn increases their political participation. Similarly, Wilbur Schramm (1964) suggests that mass media communication in developing nations helps form an appropriate "social climate" which facilitates the developmental process. Edwin Parker (1978) hypothesizes the potential benefit of communication satellites for a balanced economic growth within and across nations overcoming geographical barriers. Dennis Foote (1977), among others, has reported a potential benefit of communication satellites as improved health care and education in remote areas (See, also, Filep, 1977; Orvik, 1977).

In spite of the acknowledged potential benefits of various communication media in national development and the improvement of the quality of life, the pervasive nature of the impact of communications technology in society has raised serious questions concerning potential dangers and negative consequences.

On the domestic level, "exploitation of technology determined primarily by market factors in the private sector" (Parker, 1973), "information pollution" (Gabor, 1973), and on the international level, problems related to "equity of information flow", "cultural conservation" or "cultural imperialism" have received attention among scholars (See, for example, Dessanayke, 1977; Granzberg, 1977; Katz, 1977; Lomax, 1977; Madigan, 1977; Pool, 1977; McAnany, 1978; Parker, 1978; Porat, 1978; Rogers, 1978).

Most of the recent writings are based on macroscopic analyses of the impact of communications technology on a <u>societal</u> level. On the other hand, the (potential) consequence of communications technology at the <u>individual</u> level has not been systematically examined. While the system's approach is extremely important, it is equally vital to understand the technological impact from the point of view of the individuals who are exposed to the change. In the long run, the consequences on the individual's everyday life may be more significant than the economic and political consequences in a social system as a whole. This paper serves the purposes of introducing the parameter and increasing awareness of an international phenomenon, i.e., change in patterns of interpersonal communication in the light of communications technology.

<u>"Information Overload" and Interpersonal Communication</u>

One of the most significant characteristics of high-information societies is the increasing size and complexity of social organization. Many large social organizations are growing even larger, and at the same time, more organizations are being spawned with intricate communication systems interconnecting organizations, sub-organizations and individuals. The availability of various efficient information systems further enhances the size and complexity of the social organizations. As a result, the individual members of the organizations receive an increasing

amount of information from a greater variety of sources at an increasing speed. The "simultaneous field of information" (McLuhan, 1962) differentiates and specializes the roles of individuals in society. People can no longer completely escape from the closely inter-connected social reality.

Human communication can be viewed as the process of "information metabolism" (Ruben, 1975), and the accelerating quantity of information in one's communication environment can sometimes reach a volume that exceeds his capacity to process and control. Anyone who tries to cope with the demands of job and family responsibilities, and carry on even a moderate social life probably knows that there are times when everything has to be done at once and the world seems to be closing in on him. He is experiencing the same information overload that afflicts business managers, administrators, physicians, attorneys, and air controllers. "Information overload" is a technical term that can be applied to such stressful situations of imbalance between the communication input from the environment and the internal information-processing capacity. Alvin Toffler's Future Shock (1970) deals almost entirely with features of information overload and communication stress (See, also, Meier, 1973).

In coping with communication stress, individuals in high-information societies tend to develop mechanisms to "economize" the information-processing. They frequently select only the information that is of direct relevance to specific communication situations and functions. They then prioritize the information in the order of importance. The information that is less directly relevant to their lives can be discarded or ignored; the information that is of less importance is processed with a minimum of attention to its details. This tendency to economize information processing is nothing new but has always been the very nature of human perception. We prefer "definiteness and distinction" and "consistency or stability" of meaning to what is otherwise vague and wavering.

> We do not so much see this man and that subject; rather we notice that the thing is man or sunset, and then see chiefly what our mind is already full of on those subjects (Walter Lippmann, 1922, 71).

What is different in a "high-information" society, however, is that individuals are, to some extent, forced to exercise an unprecedented high degree of selectivity and stereotyping.

It seems that once a person is accustomed to selecting, prioritizing and discarding information, an information-processing pattern becomes internalized as part of the personality. Even when people may not actually be in a highly stressful situation, they will maintain the same cognitive pattern. Although the tendency of economizing information processing is primarily found in machine-interposed communication instead of in face-to-face interactions (Meier, 1973), people frequently communicate with others in a hurried way even in face-to-face communication situations. A further extension of the generalized impact of machine-mediated communication experiences can be observed in the ways people plan and schedule their vacation schedules almost as if they are planning a business venture.

Consequently, there is an increasing degree of impersonality in the way people communicate. Circumstances and contextual meanings are frequently discarded. Only the information that is of direct and immediate relevance to a particular transaction is expected in many interpersonal communication situations. An increase of "business-oriented" impersonality also introduces feelings of lack of interpersonal control. This type of functional orientation in interpersonal communication does not allow individuals to communicate fully and to understand individual uniquenesses in personality and circumstances.

Separation of Message-Source and Interpersonal Communication

Another important characteristic of a high-information society is the

changing mode of communication from face-to-face interaction to increased machine-mediated communication. Much of human interaction is now mediated by machines resulting in the "separation of the message from the person" (Ruesch, 1973, 7). The human voice carries only a few hundred feet and cannot be preserved. With the invention of electronic media, the separation of man from his messages has become complete. Once information is spatially and temporally independent of its source and its eventual destination, it becomes possible to store messages and to manipulate them at will.

Consequently, the integrity of a person's communication behavior can often be suspect; machine-mediated communication allows a greater gap between what is said and what is done than face-to-face communication. The messages are frequently "programmed" to maximize the communication intention or purpose of the source. Furthermore, the substitution of face-to-face interaction by machine-mediated communication results in a change of interpersonal (or social) values as well as the relationship patterns between people. Traditionally, one of the main functions of interpersonal communication is the reinforcement of existing social values that regulate a person's symbolic behavior as well as action behavior. Stable role definitions and long-lasting personal relations provide the basis of "enculturation" and the reinforcement of social norms. On the other hand, in technological systems where much of the interpersonal communication is mediated by media, reinforcement of values and symbolic behavior becomes less relevant. As the population becomes heterogeneous and as systems of belief and expression are shared less, the communication systems rely more upon the compelling influence of behavioral outcomes and less upon interpersonal imitation and the sharing of values (Reusch, 1973). Thus, the conventional ethics of interpersonal communication (such as sincerity, truthfulness, and respect for each other's feelings) are often replaced by technicality and legality and effectiveness in obtaining desired results.

A communication message usually has a complex mixture of effects on information about the world, on immediate emotional response or on overt action. Generally speaking, interpersonal communication experiences in face-to-face interaction involve all of the three effects--cognitive, affective and conative. On the other hand, machine-mediated communication experiences are primarily cognitive ones. They are not as responsive to the affective and conative aspects of face-to-face interpersonal communication since much affective and behavioral meaning is expressed in and perceived by nonverbal behaviors and physical proximity. Furthermore, mass media provide unprecedented easy access to inexpensive amusements, which are obtained primarily through face-to-face interpersonal communication in traditional societies.

The decrease in overall affective communication experiences and the increase in the functionally-oriented interpersonal communication relying heavily on only cognitive information can be viewed as low in the overall communicative involvement between people. In Beyond Culture (1976), Edward Hall provides a useful conceptual framework by which various cultures are compared. The key construct is "communication context"; cultures are differentiated on a continuum of high- and low-communication contexts. In high-context cultures, an individual's communication occurs mostly in face-to-face interaction, and much of the communication meaning is shared from contextual and nonverbal sources. On the other hand, communication in low-context cultures tends to emphasize the importance of explicit verbalization of thoughts and feelings. Although Hall does not attribute the difference of communication context to the degree of machine-mediated communication systems, low-context cultures generally coincide with the societies with extensive communications technology. In other words, there is a close relationship between the presence of extensive communications technology and low-context communication systems within a society (See, also, Fischer, 1973).

The lack of affective and behavioral sharing in machine-mediated communication is related to a decrease in the major characteristic necessary for coping, i.e., the emotional involvement between people which is taken for granted when communicating face-to-face. Television and radio are one-way media and allow transmission of messages that are far beyond the limits of the empathy which a producer and a sender can experience personally. The telephone links participants in a communication situation, but makes it difficult to adapt the medium to fit the circumstances and is far less effective in communicating feelings than the face-to-face interaction. Philip Slater (1970), in The Pursuit of Loneliness, describes the same communication phenomena -- lack of affective sharing among people.

Communications technology has brought about a "Great Society" in that individuals in various parts of a country constitute a single social entity from coast to coast. They are linked and made interdependent through the conjunction of giant communication media including television networks. However, the electronically inter-connected communication experiences produce consequences that differ in kind from those of the "communal" experiences in traditional societies. The behavior of individuals in a technological society is closer to "isolated" behavior and thus involves much less intensity of "empathy". Even though a computerized system of electronic voting and opinion polling may come sooner than we now anticipate (Newsweek, 1978), the communication experiences mediated by machines cannot provide the same feelings and attitudes that enable members of a small community to participate in another's sentiments and purposes.

A similar inference can be made about international communication via communication media. The quantity of information that is transmitted across national boundaries increases daily with the advancement of communications

technology. Television, in particular, plays a crucial role in today's international politics by providing simultaneous reports on events as they occur. However, Marshall McLuhan's belief that television will "retribalize" man in the "global village" leading him back to the communal experiences of an oral culture may not necessarily be true in reality. The global experiences of television viewers are basically cognitive ones involving very little affective sharing with the people they see on the screen. The images of the world and peoples that one learns about through television and other media are the symbolic stereotypes which are simplified, abstract, and often biased, because of the very nature of machine-mediated communication.

Implications for Cross-Cultural Transfer of Communications Technology

So far, some of the major characteristics of interpersonal communication that are observed in highly technological societies have been discussed in the light of the pervasive presence of communications technology. If it is true that technological changes in traditional societies will introduce social impact similar to what they have brought about in the high-information societies, then both the positive and negative consequences need to be seriously considered in planning communications systems for development. Effective planning requires perceptive insight and a good understanding of the nature of social and cultural change in the societies that have already experienced stages of technological development. It must go beyond the forecasting of direct and quantifiable economic effects.

The patterns of change in interpersonal communication as communications systems of a society become more complex are in direct conflict with the existing modes of communication and social values that still prevail in traditional

societies. As a result introducing modern communications technology to traditional social systems may have a serious, disharmonious impact on the existing social structure, values, and interpersonal relationships. When frustration persists and is intensified, consequences that are not at all beneficial may occur in the form of weakened interpersonal ties among members of primary groups and confusion of social values and behavioral modes.

Modernization inevitably requires social system disturbance through which progress and reformations may occur. Certain changes are necessary and, to some extent, inevitable, if many traditional societies are to improve their economic and political strengths. Any significant change in the life of an individual or a group introduces some degree of instability or disturbance in the way life-activities and beliefs and attitudes are organized. Modernization processes raise societal capacity to handle changes and increase the cognitive flexibility of individuals to deal with the changes on the personal level. Communications technology advances development when, in addition to furnishing information, it provides appropriate exposure to change.

The crucial issue, then, is not whether or not a nation should introduce certain communication technologies, but rather, to what extent it will benefit from them, for what price, through what mechanisms the potential negative consequences may be prevented or minimized, how to maintain the dignity of individuals, and how to avoid a self-defeating attitude denouncing their own cultural inheritances. One of the ways to minimize the potential disturbances to an existing culture and interpersonal communication system is to utilize the existing social network and structure in introducing new innovations in communications technology. Several recent studies have reported a beneficial use of radio and television in combination with the existing communication networks (See, for example, Chu et al, 1976; Cassirer, 1977; McAnany, 1978). With careful planning, new communi-

cations technology can be utilized to preserve and even enhance certain existing cultural values instead of completely changing them, to strengthen local communities instead of to destroy them, and at the same time it can raise the national consciousness and political participation of individual members.

The essence of governmental responsibility in introducing new communications technology is to choose one or more of many alternative solutions and to modify them in order to maximumize benefits for all individuals within the system. The ethics of governmental decisions in developing nations should lie in the area of purposes and a social philosophy which will give positive meanings and values to the man-made technological communications system.

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